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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Vice Chairperson of the Navajo Nation Council's Education Committee Wallace Charley (Shiprock) released the following letter:

**A LETTER TO NAVAJO NATION HEAD START FAMILIES,
EMPLOYEES AND THE NAVAJO NATION PEOPLE**

The recent suspension of the Navajo Head Start program has sent a wave of concern throughout the Navajo Nation. I would like to present this report on the actions that the Navajo Nation Council Education Committee has taken since the program was suspended and to provide an assurance to Head Start families and employees.

The Education Committee has been approached by many Head Start parents who are concerned about the program and, most of all, about their little ones. The Committee understands and respects their concerns. As parents you placed your trust in the Program to care for every aspect of your children's welfare while they were away from home. I urge all Head Start families to not give up on the Program but to continue to demand improvements so that our children will return to a safe and better Program.

Navajo Head Start has many great, long-time employees. The reported criminal records of some employees should not give a black eye to all Head Start employees. Our Head Start employees are a tremendous resource. The Education Committee honors your contributions and will always listen to your concerns. Some of you have reported frustration over the lack of information that you have received from the Head Start leadership since the suspension of the program. The Committee understands your frustration and urges your patience. Please stick with Navajo Head Start as it goes through this challenging time. The Education Committee is confident that the outcome will be a better and stronger Head Start Program.

There is one bit of good news, which is that earlier this week, on May 16th, the Navajo Nation received notice from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), that it will partially lift the summary suspension as it relates to the Early Head Start Program. The regular Head Start Program will remain suspended for the time being. Based on our on-going meetings, we are optimistic that the whole suspension could be lifted before regular Head Start classes begin in the Fall. However, within 45 days of the suspension (by mid-June), DHHS will be delivering a detailed report on all the problems its review team identified. There are likely to be many issues that must be addressed if Navajo Head Start is going to be the excellent program our children deserve.

For several years, the Education Committee, in response to inquiries by parents and others, has sought to work with Navajo Head Start to address the many issues that were being raised. In 2005, the Education Committee formally requested a Navajo Nation audit of the Program, which, was completed and released just a week ago. The Navajo Nation Auditor General, like the Federal government, identified serious problems in the operation and management of the Navajo Nation Head Start Program. Even prior to the audit, the Committee had been raising questions about the program, but had not received satisfactory answers from the Navajo Nation executive branch.

Since the suspension was announced, the Education Committee has met many times. Our first meeting was on Wednesday, May 3, 2006, the day after the summary suspension notice was received. At that meeting the Committee questioned Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr. regarding how this situation had arisen and how it would be addressed. At that meeting, there was no final answer to these important questions. The final answers may not be easy or comfortable, but if we do not address them our programs cannot succeed. The Committee will continue to pursue these questions until we have satisfactory answers as is our responsibility and role in overseeing the education of our children.

The Committee also met on Monday, May 8, 2006 and heard from Navajo Nation Vice President Frank Dayish, Jr., as the President was on travel to Washington, DC to meet with Head Start officials. While the Committee supports the President's travel to Washington with 13 other individuals to meet on this matter, it is unfortunate that the Navajo Nation must incur so much additional cost to fix a problem that should have been recognized and fixed long ago.

On Tuesday May 9th, the Committee received testimony from President Shirley and the Navajo Nation Department of Justice regarding the meeting in Washington and learned that the Navajo Nation had received notice that the DHHS would amend its suspension by allowing "shut down" activities to take place. The federal government agreed to release \$413,231 to pay certain tribal Head Start staff to complete assessment of each student's file and secure federal property.

Last year, the Education Committee brought to the Navajo Nation Council legislation that made significant changes to our tribal education laws including, most notably, the establishment of the Navajo Nation's own Department of Education. Through this new law we said we can and will take control of our educational affairs. While the suspension of Head Start is a black eye to this effort, we know that achieving what is good brings with it obstacles and challenges. This is what our elders taught us and what we tell our children today. We will be tested and there are times when we must admit our weaknesses so that we can grow and flourish. We will overcome this challenge, but will only make progress if we learn from it and apply those lessons to all our education programs.

The Committee will be holding more meetings on the Navajo Nation Head Start Program. I want to take this opportunity to encourage Head Start families and employees to give us your thoughts, both positive and critical about the program. We want to preserve the Program's many good characteristics, but quickly correct the Program's failures. Hopefully, the Federal suspension of the program, no matter how painful it feels today will, in the end, be a good thing if it leads to a better program for our Navajo children, families and communities.

Head Start should provide a place that is nourishing and safe for our little ones. The suspension of the Navajo Head Start program is a serious matter and the Education Committee is taking it seriously. There is nothing more precious than our children. The Committee will not back down in its efforts to ensure that this program is not only restored, but achieves excellence.

Sincerely,

Wallace Charley, Vice Chairman
Education Committee of the Navajo Nation Council